

## The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

### KAREN JEAN ORNDORFF VEHLOW

September 30, 1975



**Karen Jean Orndorff Vehlow** was born on December 6, 1948, in Chicago, Illinois, the youngest of three children to Harvey and Dorothy Orndorff. During her childhood, Vehlow's father was a successful investment banker and stockbroker. At the age of six, Vehlow and her family moved to a "farm" in Barrington, Illinois, where her mother operated a dog boarding business, along with a Christmas and nursery tree farm. Attending public schools in Palatine, Illinois, Vehlow participated in student council, band, tutoring services, and a myriad of clubs, graduating from high school in 1967. Horses have always been important to Vehlow and her involvement and interest in them continues to this day.

Vehlow completed her undergraduate studies in humanities and pre-law at Michigan State University, and proceeded directly to Wayne State University School of Law in Detroit, Michigan. Despite the immediate path chosen, Vehlow did not plan on becoming a lawyer; she simply wanted to "get educated." The first year class at Wayne State consisted of ten women out of approximately 220 students, but being in the minority did not deter Vehlow from her pursuit of an advanced degree. Rejecting the typical clerking and research assistant positions, she instead taught swimming and was employed as a lifeguard during law school. Upon graduating from Wayne State in 1973, Vehlow worked for two years with Wayne County (Detroit) Legal Services representing and assisting those in extreme poverty.

At the encouragement of her brother, Owen Orndorff, an attorney for Boise Cascade, Vehlow moved to Boise. On September 30, 1975, Vehlow was admitted to practice law in Idaho and began a position as the first female Ada County Deputy Prosecutor. At that time Vehlow recalls that there were only twelve female attorneys in all of Idaho, and thus her employment with Ada County caused quite a stir and even made the front page of the *Idaho Statesman*. Two short years later, with a well-rounded background of poverty, civil, and criminal law, Vehlow prevailed over thirteen male competitors in 1977 to be appointed as the first female magistrate in Ada County at the age of twenty-seven.

Not long after her initial appointment and re-election, Vehlow became embroiled in the infamous *The Idaho Statesman* case beginning in 1980. The case received national attention after Vehlow held a *Statesman* reporter in contempt and placed her in jail for failing to reveal the location of a non-custodial mother who had absconded with her child in a hotly contested child custody case. Amid death threats and surrounded by bodyguards, Vehlow was labeled the "Hanging Judge." She never backed down, continued to assess the daily \$500 fine (essentially paying her magistrate salary for a year) and eventually was able to return the child to the safety of her father.

Vehlow stepped down from the bench in April 1981 choosing instead to partner with her husband, John C. Vehlow – now also an Ada County magistrate – in private practice and in raising their son, Eric. Throughout this period, which lasted until 2001, Vehlow taught at Boise

State University, Northwest Nazarene University, and Albertson College of Idaho, all the while enjoying long vacations, a “heck of a lot more creativity,” enhanced calendar control and an absence of life-threatening stress. In fact, mother actually taught son in several classes at NNU, followed by Eric’s enrollment as a first year at the University of Idaho College of Law. Eric is deployed in Iraq with the Idaho National Guard as a law clerk with the Judge Advocate General Corps.

Vehlow returned as a senior judge in 1990 and she currently presides over juvenile cases in Ada County two days a week, child protective cases in Ada County one day a week, small claims cases two afternoons a month in Canyon County, and occasionally fills in for vacationing judges. This schedule suits Vehlow and allows her sufficient time to “work” her 90-acre farm, care for her horses, and read books.